

Decision Record
Queen Valley Fuels Reduction Project

NEPA No: DOI-BLM-AZ-P020-2011-021-EA

Decision:

It is my decision to authorize the Queen Valley Fuels Reduction Project as proposed in the attached Environmental Assessment. The authorization will allow the Lower Sonoran Field Office and the Phoenix District Fire Staff to take action to reduce hazardous fuels on 160 acres of public lands within the Queen Valley community. The need for action stems from increased fire danger in the wildland urban interface. Through the Environmental Assessment process, the BLM has determined the action will not conflict with other BLM programs.

Rationale for Decision:

The proposed action is in conformance with the *Proposed Phoenix Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement* dated December, 1988. The plan has been reviewed to determine compliance with the terms and conditions set forth by providing for "A close coordination with other fire organizations with suppression (*and fuel reduction*) responsibilities would continue for areas adjacent to public land in the RMP area" (Page 17).

_____/S/_____
Manager, Lower Sonoran Field Office

____01-10-2012_____
Date

Finding of No Significant Impact
DOI-BLM-AZ-PO20-2011-021-EA
Queen Valley Fuels Reduction Project

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the attached environmental assessment (EA), and considering the significance criteria in 40 CFR 1508.27, I have determined that the proposed action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. An environmental impact statement is therefore not required.

Context

The proposed action would treat up to 160 acres of Sonoran Desert vegetation on the public lands within the Queen Valley community.

Intensity

The following discussion is organized around the 10 Significance Criteria described at 40 CFR 1508.27. The following have been considered in evaluating intensity for this proposal:

- 1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse:** Reducing the fuels would be beneficial, because it will lessen the fire potential for the community. Not reducing the fuels could increase the fire potential and the likelihood of directly impacting local residences. Mitigation measures have been included to reduce or eliminate potential adverse impacts to other resources in the area. Therefore the beneficial effects outweigh potential adverse effects from implementing the proposed action.
- 2. Degree of effect on public health and safety:** Public health and safety would be improved under the proposed action by reducing the potential fire risk in the Queen Valley community. Under the no action alternative, potential adverse impacts to public health and safety would be greater.
- 3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas:** There are no unique characteristics in the project area.
- 4. Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial:** There is no substantial controversy over the effects of the proposed project.
- 5. Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risk:** There are no known or uncertain risks associated with the proposed project.

6. Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration:

The proposed project would not set a precedent for future fuels reduction actions.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts: Treatment of up to 160 acres of vegetation would not have a direct, indirect, or cumulative adverse impact on other actions including energy development, production, supply and/or distribution.

8. Degree to which the action may adversely affect district, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources: No impacts to objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places, scientific, cultural or historical resources would occur from implementation of the proposed action.

9. Degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat: The project does not contain suitable habitat for threatened or endangered species.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of federal, state, or local environmental protection law: This proposal is consistent with applicable state and federal laws, regulations, and policy and the proposed action is consistent with applicable the *Proposed Phoenix Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement*.

_____/S/_____
Emily Garber
Manager, Lower Sonoran Field Office

____01-10-2012_____
Date

Queen Valley Fuels Reduction Project
Environmental Assessment
DOI-BLM-AZ-P020-2011-021-EA

Prepared by: _____/S/_____
Project Lead

Reviewed by: _____/S/_____
Planning & Environmental Coordinator

Approved by: _____/S/_____
Manager, Lower Sonoran Field Office



Table of Contents

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Alternatives..... | 3 |
| Affected Environment..... | 4 |

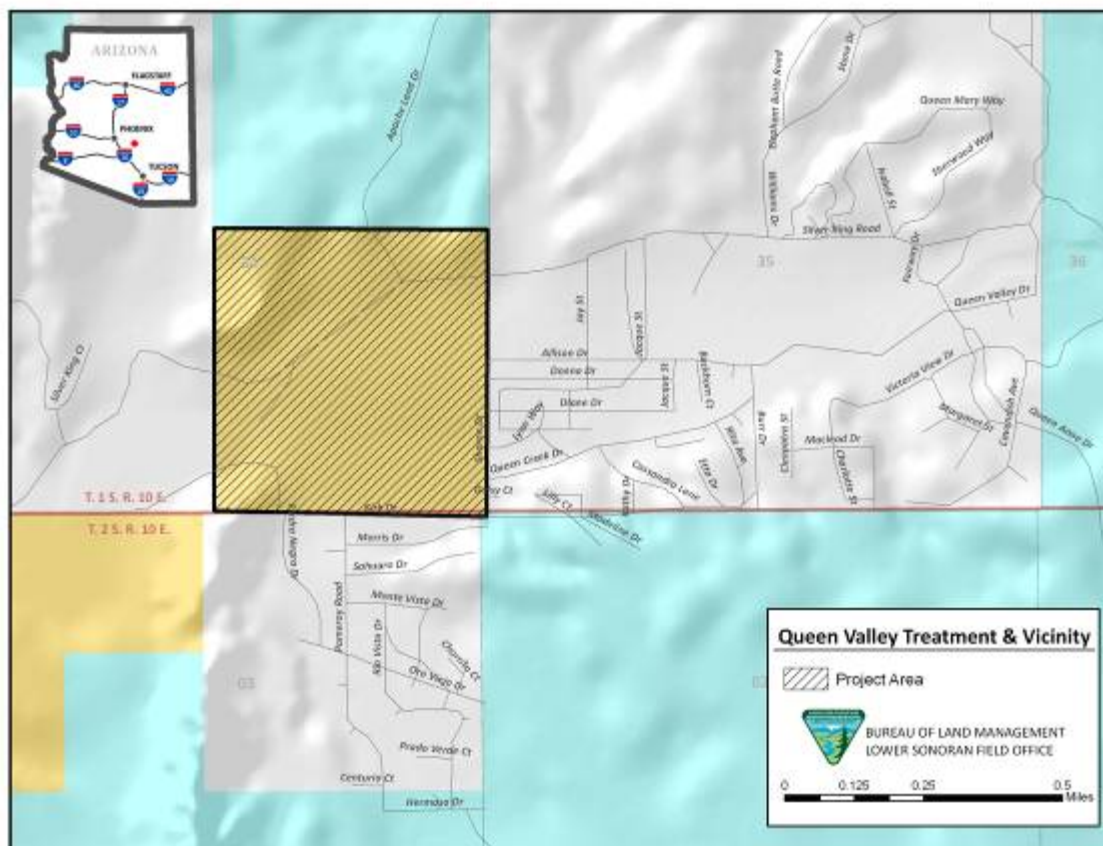
| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Environmental Consequences..... | 6 |
| List of Preparers..... | 7 |

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Lower Sonoran Field Office (LSFO) administers several hundred acres of public lands located within the community of Queen Valley, Arizona. One quarter-section of public lands (160 acres, SE1/4 Sec.34 T1S, R10E) is located immediately adjacent to community residences. Local residents and the Queen Valley Fire District have requested that BLM treat vegetation on the public lands adjacent to the community in order to reduce wildfire risk. Wildfire risk from BLM-administered land bordering the community has increased because vegetation has encroached closer to community homes and roads. Members of the community have requested that brush, trees, and grass be reduced to improve safety. A lightening-induced wildfire occurred in the proposed treatment area in 2005.

The BLM is preparing an environmental assessment (EA) in order to analyze the environmental impacts of a proposed action and alternatives. Pending analysis, the BLM will determine whether or not to reduce hazardous fuels vegetation on public lands within the community of Queen Valley.

Project Area Location



Purpose and Need for Action and Decision to be Made

The purpose of the proposed project is to increase public and wildland firefighter safety by reducing hazardous fuels from the public lands located adjacent to the community of Queen Valley. The need for action stems from increased fire danger in the wildland urban interface. The decision to be made is whether or not to implement the proposed plan or an alternative.

Land Use Plan Conformance

The proposed action is in conformance with the *Proposed Phoenix Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement* dated December, 1988. The plan has been reviewed to determine compliance with terms and conditions. The plan makes the following decision: "A close coordination with other fire organizations with suppression (*and fuel reduction*) responsibilities would continue for areas adjacent to public land in the RMP area" (Page 17).

Relationship to Statutes, Regulations or Other Plans

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (Public Law 94-579) provided that public lands were to be managed "on the basis of multiple use and sustained yield unless otherwise specified by law". 43 CFR 9212.0-06 states "It is the policy of the Bureau of Land Management to take all necessary actions to protect human life, the public lands and the resources and improvements thereon through the prevention of wildfires. Wherever possible, the Bureau of Land Management's actions will complement and support State and local wildlife prevention actions." The use proposed by this action is consistent with federal, state or local plans.

Scoping and Issues

Scoping & Public Participation

Internal scoping was conducted with an interdisciplinary team of specialists.

External scoping was conducted with individual residents of Queen Valley and representatives from the Fire District. Risks were discussed with residents and a formal request was received from the Queen Valley Fire District to assist with the reducing the fire risk on public land. The Queen Valley Fire District Staff recommended a joint effort among BLM, Pinal County and the Queen Valley Fire District.

Issues

The following resource issues were identified as potentially being impacted by the proposed action:

- Removal of **vegetation**, including **sensitive species**, for reduced wildland fire risk would impact vegetation resources in the proposed project area.
- **Wildlife** species and habitat, including **sensitive species** could be impacted by the proposed action
- **Public Safety** could be compromised if the hazardous fuels are not reduced on public land
- Excessive **noise** could occur from tree/shrub removal
- **Recreation** activities could be impacted by the proposed action

Alternatives

Proposed Action

The proposed action is to reduce hazardous fuels (vegetation) by thinning the overgrowth located on public land immediately adjacent to the Queen Valley community on approximately 160 acres of public lands. Manual treatments would be utilized and up to three fuel breaks would be created to limit fire spread. Under the proposed action, approximate three-quarters of an acre would be treated initially (located on the public lands 200 feet from the centerline of Kirk and Sharon paved roads), with the potential for entire 160-acre quarter-section to be treated in later efforts.

Manual treatments include the use of chainsaws, handsaws, clippers, etc. Hand tools would be utilized to trim large trees and remove brush. When operating chainsaws or other spark-producing equipment, spark arrestor devices would be used and fire extinguishers would be on hand. Vegetation would be chipped and removed from the site or mulched locally, with remaining debris raked and scattered.

Fire equipment would be on hand during all operations to ensure safety. Operations would take place during cooler seasons, when the weather is amenable. Operations would be limited to the hours to 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Each treatment is anticipated to occur over three to four weeks. Treated areas would be assessed annually to determine future maintenance needs. In any given year, no more than 10 acres would be treated.

No Action Alternative

Under the no action alternative, hazardous fuels reduction would not occur.

Alternatives Considered but Removed from Detailed Analysis

An alternative may be eliminated from detailed analysis if:

- it is ineffective (it would not respond to the purpose and need).
- it is technically or economically infeasible.
- it is inconsistent with the basic policy objectives for the management of the area.
- its implementation is remote or speculative.
- it is substantially similar in design to an alternative that is analyzed.
- it would have substantially similar effects to an alternative that is analyzed.

The following alternatives were considered but removed from detailed analysis: use of fire and use of herbicides for hazardous fuels reduction. Both treatment types are less cost-effective than the proposed action. Since the project area is located within a PM10 non-attainment area, its utilization would be inconsistent with the basic policy objectives for the area. Finally, because the treatment area is located very close to a residential area, risk of spread is high.

Affected Environment

The proposed project area is located approximately 50 miles east of downtown Phoenix within the Queen Valley Community. The general area is within the Arizona Upland Subdivision of the Sonoran Desert Biome. The Sonoran Desert is a subtropical desert with bi-seasonal (winter and summer) rainfall patterns, with annual precipitation averaging 8" per year that falls mainly in the form of summer rains which promotes a high diversity of plant and animal species. Predominant public use in the area includes hiking, and Off-highway Vehicle (OHV) driving.

The following resources were considered and found to be unaffected by the proposed and no action alternatives, and are therefore not analyzed further:

- Areas of Critical Environmental Concern
- Threatened & Endangered Species
- Cultural Resources

- Socioeconomic Resources & Environmental Justice
- Hazardous and Solid Wastes
- Floodplains
- Mineral Resources
- Prime or Unique Farmlands
- Water Quality
- Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Native American Religious Concerns
- Riparian or Wetland Zones
- Wilderness Areas and Lands Managed to Maintain Wilderness Characteristics
- Visual Resources

The following resources have the potential to be impacted by the proposed action.

Vegetation

The project area consists primarily of palo verde, saguaro, mesquite, ironwood, white and triangle leaf bursage, cactus species, jojoba, and various grasses and shrubs. A more complete description of the area can be found in the Lower Gila South Resource Management Plan (January, 2000).

Wildlife

Wildlife species native to the area are typical of the vegetative community may include but are not limited to mule deer, javelina, coyote, mountain lion, desert cottontail, black-tailed jackrabbit, various small non-game mammals, reptiles and birds (including Gambel's quail and mourning dove).

Sensitive Species

The sensitive species that could occur in the project area may include, but are not limited to Hohokam agave, *Agave murpheyi*; desert tortoise, *Gopherus agassizii*, and Gilbert's skink, *Eumeces gilberti arizonensis*.

Public Safety

Local residences are located immediately adjacent to the public land. The Queen Valley Fire District has identified wildland fire as a risk to public safety in this location.

Noise

The Queen Valley Community is a small community located off State Highway 60 and relatively quiet, with most residents residing during the fall, winter and spring, but vacating during the summer months.

Recreation

Recreational activities in the area consist primarily of OHV use, viewing wildlife and hiking.

Environmental Consequences**Proposed Action Alternative****Vegetation**

The large native tree species would be trimmed, with the smaller tree species removed. No more than ten acres of vegetation would be disturbed in any given year. Desert broom and various non-native shrubs would be mulched; however no major surface disturbing activities would be authorized under the proposed action and minor impacts, while greater than impacts from the no action alternative, are expected to be temporary.

Wildlife

The proposed action may cause temporary disturbance to individual animals but no more than other incidental human activities from the residence in the immediate area. Temporary disturbance would come in the form of noise from saws and mulchers, along with other disturbance during vegetation reduction activities. Once the project is completed, human disturbance in the immediate area would be eliminated. Any impacts would be minimal and temporary to resident wildlife populations and would not affect wildlife populations at the local, state or national level, though impacts to wildlife under the proposed action are expected to be greater than those under the no action alternative.

Sensitive Species

The proposed project would have negligible to minor temporary impact on sensitive species habitat. This would have a greater impact than the no action alternative.

Public Safety

Public safety would be improved under the proposed action, as compared to the no action alternative, because wildland fire risk would be reduced.

Noise

Crews would be using chainsaws and chippers, which could have a temporary effect on the noise quality adjacent to project activities. Impacts are expected to be greater than the no action alternative and moderate but temporary in duration.

Recreation

The proposed action could temporarily affect recreational activities in the specific area in question. Overall impacts are expected to be negligible and similar to the no action alternative.

Cumulative Impacts

Under the proposed action, the cumulative impacts to vegetation, wildlife, sensitive species, public safety, noise and recreation would be minimal and similar to those created by causal use in the area.

No Action Alternative

If the proposed action is not authorized, no impacts to vegetation, wildlife, sensitive species, noise and recreation would occur. However, the fire danger would still exist for local residences and impacts to public safety could be major if the area experiences a wildland fire. Not reducing the hazardous fuels would leave the area potentially susceptible to fire.

List of Preparers

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Emily Garber | Manager, Lower Sonoran Field Office |
| Jack Ragsdale | Outdoor Recreation Planner, Project Lead |
| Brian Achziger | Fire Management Officer, Acting |
| Leah Baker | Planning & Environmental Coordinator |
| Steve Bird | Wildlife Biologist |
| JoAnn Goodlow | Lands Realty Specialist |
| Bryan Lausten | Archaeologist |
| Ken Shaver | Fire Prevention Specialist |